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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W (JHUNTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/15/2018

TAGS: KIRF PHUM SL

SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS CLASH FALSELY REPORTED IN SIERRA LEONE

Classified By: Ambassador June Carter Perry for reasons 1/4 (b/d)

¶1. (U) Summary: Media reports of a clash between Christians and Muslims in East Freetown on September 5 were largely overblown. Though an altercation did ensue between congregants of the Calaba Town mosque and the Achiever's Church, it appears that the conflict was the result of noise pollution rather than religious differences. Initial press reports characterized the situation as one of religious intolerance, a dangerous accusation in a heavily (60%) Muslim country during the month of Ramadan, but the furor quickly died down once the Inter-Religious Council was called in to mediate. Sierra Leone is a country noted for its religious tolerance, and this particular occurrence does not represent a significant change to that element of the country's stability and peace. End summary.

¶2. (U) On September 5, worshippers at the Calaba Town mosque reported that their prayers were disrupted by the neighboring Achiever's Church's broadcast of Christian music over large speakers. The Muslim community in the area enjoys good relations with the other two Christian churches in the vicinity, but has had long-standing problems with Achiever's, which plays loud music to accompany sermons (Note: Music, both religious and secular, is played in public places at very loud volumes throughout Freetown at all hours. End note). Previous disputes regarding musical disruptions were handled by the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) and the Paramount Chief, resulting in an agreement that worship in the mosque and church can occur simultaneously as long as both parties are respectful of noise and other potentially distracting behavior. Given this agreement, the Islamic community was angered when music was loudly played just as their prayers were due to end on the 5th. A reportedly Muslim crowd gathered and threw rocks at the church, leading to a small riot with some unconfirmed injuries. The SLP eventually calmed the scene and made several arrests.

¶3. (U) On September 9, the local SLP station hosted a mediation meeting which included members from both congregations, the Paramount Chief, and the Inter-Religious Council. All agreed that tolerance and restraint must be shown in the future. A six-member committee was established to monitor the peace and report any other disturbances, and includes equal representation from the Christian and Muslim communities. Future meetings will be held to design a more effective plan for worshipping side by side.

¶4. (C) Comment: This particular incident, both unusual and unfortunate, appears to be rooted in differences over how to worship, rather than what to worship. Muslim and Christian citizens reported having no issues with the beliefs of the other, and the Imam noted that he regularly attends Christian services and special events. Christian Pastors are known to be equally participatory in Muslim ceremonies. The response by government officials and the Inter-Religious Council was swift and fostered almost immediate conciliation between the groups, which is a positive sign that the issues underlying events on September 5 were relatively shallow and are not

representative of deeply-held anger or suspicion between the faith communities. That said, the question of why the Achiever's Church chose to loudly play their music on Islam's holiest day of the week in their holiest month remains unanswered. In that context, this action appears deliberately provocative. Post will monitor this particular location to see if issues recur, but given the isolation of this incident, it does not appear religious friction is on the rise in Sierra Leone. End comment.

PERRY